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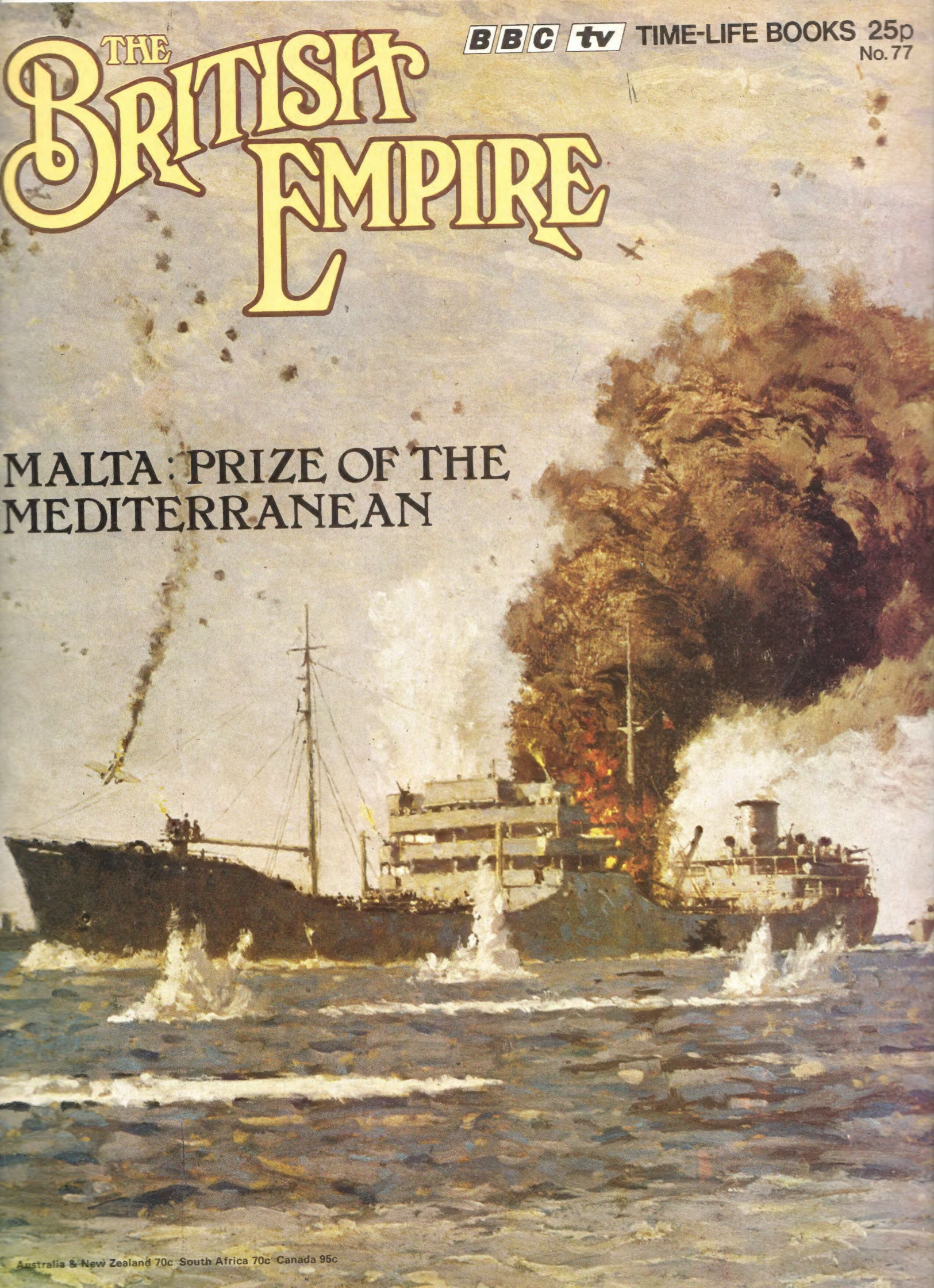
THE BRITISH EMPIRE

MALTA: PRIZE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN



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MALTA: PRIZE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

A cartoon of 1803 shows the British seadog keeping a firm foothold on the "Bone of Contention" – Malta – and defying a foppish Napoleon.

Throughout her history, barren little Malta has been a prize pursued by the powerful for her superb harbour and strategic position at the navel of the Mediterranean. The Maltese accepted their fate uncomplainingly until 1798, when Napoleon attempted to impose his anti-clerical regime on this most Catholic people. Then they rebelled and invited the protection of the British, who were initially reluctant to get involved (Nelson was more concerned to keep Minorca). British rule was finally extended in 1814. For over a century thereafter, the island was a favoured station on the seaway to India. In 1941 Malta repaid the years of British protection when she withstood the terrible ordeal of the Axis siege.

by Nigel Nicolson

On June 9, 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte anchored off the entrance to Malta's Grand Harbour and sent ashore to the Knights of the Order of St. John an apparently innocuous request for water. The ships of many nations had for centuries called at Malta for this very purpose, and there seemed no good reason for refusing him. The knights were not at war with France; they were not at war with anyone. But Bonaparte had with him a fleet of 470 ships, containing 50,000 soldiers and sailors on their way to conquer Egypt, and he was in a hurry. If the knights allowed the fleet to water, they would antagonize the British; if they refused, Bonaparte need only land a small detachment to seize the island.

His "request" was a thinly disguised ultimatum. Water was not his main need at that moment; his objective was Malta itself, and the knights knew it. Hoping to placate him without endangering their neutrality, they dug up an old rule of the Order which permitted only four ships of a nation at war to enter the Grand Harbour at a time, and this was the reply to the ultimatum which Grand Master Ferdinand von Hompesch sent out to the French flagship *L'Orient*. It was rejected.

Bonaparte put a few troops ashore next day, and there was almost no resistance. On June 11 von Hompesch sent out his representatives to *L'Orient* to discuss terms, and at 3 a.m. the seasick deputies signed, in Bonaparte's cabin, an instrument of total capitulation. Five hundred knights, 2,000 regular troops and 10,000 Maltese militia were required to lay down their arms. With scarcely a shot fired, the most formidable fortifications in the world passed into French hands, together with 1,200 guns, 40,000 muskets and six magnificent warships.

It was as simple as that. The Order of St. John ended its glorious occupation of Malta by an act of abject surrender. Bonaparte had picked up in passing what he described as "the strongest fortress in the Mediterranean, in its very centre, and it will cost those dear who will dislodge us." Those who did dislodge him were the British, and it cost them the lives of a few sailors but not a single soldier, though it took them some time before they came to see the island for what it was: a key to the Mediterranean, in peace as well as in war. For 150 years, for the entire period of her great imperial power, Britain jealously safeguarded this central link in the ocean chain of imperial control.

The Knights of St. John had been on Malta since 1530, when, having been driven by the Turks from Rhodes, they were granted it, together with the satellite island of Gozo, and Tripoli, by Charles V of Spain in return for the annual tribute of a falcon, in acknowledgement of Spanish suzerainty. Their finest hour, the Great Siege of 1565, when they held Malta against the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, was followed by two centuries of comparative peace. They constructed on the main island of Malta and on Gozo a stupendous ring of fortresses which rose like white cliffs round the Grand Harbour, and four cities, Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua of which the first, for architectural pageantry and splendour, had few equals among the great Renaissance and Baroque cities of Europe.

Malta came to be known as "the bulwark of the Faith" against the Ottomans. "If the Turks should prevail against the Isle of Malta," Queen Elizabeth I had said, "it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom." Because it was so strong, so beautiful and so rich, because it lay centrally between the north and south shores of the Mediterranean, and equidistant from the straits of Gibraltar and the Levant, and because the Order replaced the Crusades as the magnet which drew the romantic youth of all Europe's aristocracy, Malta acquired a fame and importance that no other rock has held in history.

The Order was, however, a splendid medieval anachronism in a fast-changing world. As the Turkish menace faded, the Order was left without any real function. The knights, living on memories of the past, and with no enemy except the Barbary pirates – brigands, nominally Turkish subjects, from the coastal cities of Algeria and Tunisia – degenerated into a feudal oligarchy, a band of philandering idlers. Their luxurious style of living mocked their vows of poverty; their vows of celibacy became meaningless, for they took as their mistresses the wives and daughters of Malta's most honourable families. Corruption was rife in every branch of government.

The Grand Master ruled as an autocrat and the Maltese were little better than vassals in their own island, denied any share in the honours and privileges of the Order which they had come to hate. They looked to another power – almost any other power – to rid them of this tyranny, and when they found that many of the French knights, attracted by the doctrines of the Revolution, were willing to collaborate with France, they told von Hompesch that if he did not surrender to Bonaparte, they would. The Order was expelled in less than a week, the Grand Master going to Trieste and most of the best knights to St. Petersburg. It never returned.

The Maltese soon realized that they had exchanged one despot for another. In six phrenetic days Bonaparte turned Malta into a French dominion; he imposed French as the official language, obliged the people to wear the revolutionary cockade, abolished the local nobility, imposed taxes, refused to honour the Order's debts and pensions, and, worst of all in the eyes of this deeply Catholic people, reduced drastically the number of religious houses and stripped the churches of their ornaments and plate. Without realizing what discontent he was leaving behind him, Bonaparte sailed with his fleet for Egypt, garrisoning Malta with a mere 4,000 men under General Claude-Henri Vaubois.

Two events quickly transformed the situation and brought Malta into the British Empire. Lord Nelson shattered the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile on August 1, 1798; and the Maltese rose against the French.

The news from Egypt had not yet reached Valetta when the Maltese, with astonishing courage, struck for their independence. The actual cause of the revolt on September 2 was the French spoliation of the churches at Medina, the ancient, Arab-founded capital. Having no hope of holding the island against the infuriated people, General Vaubois abandoned Gozo and the country districts of Malta and retreated to the vast fortifications

around the Grand Harbour; the Maltese formed a provisional government and an assembly. Thus it happened that the knights' defences of Malta were tested for the first and only time in history by the Maltese themselves. They camped outside the walls and appealed for help to King Ferdinand of Naples and to Nelson and the Royal Navy.

Ferdinand, still in legal and feudal terms the liege-lord of Malta as Charles V's inheritor, was weak and unhelpful, "perspiring in gold lace, powder and black velvet," (as one historian, Carola Oman, describes him) frightened of Bonaparte, weak in arms and uninterested in the Maltese rebels. The Maltese turned to Britain "as an ally of their Sovereign." Would Nelson blockade the French by sea while they maintained their blockade by land? If British and Maltese acted together, Vaubois could be starved out.

The British government agreed, "and if the chance was given to seize the islands for Britain," but (and the proviso is important) "His Majesty does not entertain any idea of acquiring the sovereignty of Malta for himself," since it belonged to the King of Naples. The British fleet would blockade the island as an act of war and hand it back to its rightful owners at the peace. For two years the French held out. Nelson first sent his Portuguese allies to blockade the island, but the British fleet itself then took over, preventing the French ships trapped in the harbour from escaping and all but very few supply ships from reaching Vaubois. But the besiegers soon found themselves in a worse plight than the besieged. While Vaubois could draw upon the vast stores of grain left in the underground granaries of the forts, and water from their wells, the Maltese soon exhausted their home-grown food.

Nothing came from Sicily, as the harvest there had failed, and Maltese ships which reached Naples either returned empty or were detained in quarantine. The only support which the King of Naples supplied, despite Nelson's appeals, were two mortars, both of which broke down after firing 50 rounds. (It was not entirely due to lack of commitment: in 1798 Naples

In this contemporary fresco, the Knights of St. John, traditional protectors of Christendom, withstand the Turkish siege of Malta in 1565.

MINORCA: THE OTHER MALTA

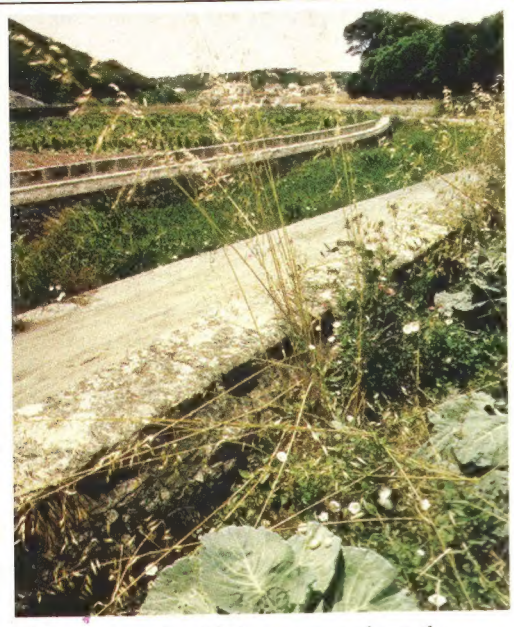
These British lions, left behind in Minorca in 1802, today support the Spanish coat of arms.

In the 18th Century, Minorca played a role that came to be Malta's in the 19th and 20th. Seized from Spain in 1713, the island, with its fine harbour, afforded Britain a strategic base from which to control the Mediterranean. Five years later, Admiral Byng used it to launch a crushing assault against the Spanish fleet. With Byng was his 13-year-old son, John who, 38 years later was himself entrusted with the vital task of saving Minorca, this time from the French.

Besieged by 15,000 French troops the British garrison were desperately awaiting Byng and his relief force of ten warships. But after a skirmish with the superior French fleet, Byng withdrew to Gibraltar, leaving the Minorcan garrison to succumb. News of its fall was greeted in England as a national disaster and Byng was shot for his part in it – "*pour encourager les autres*," in Voltaire's wry words.

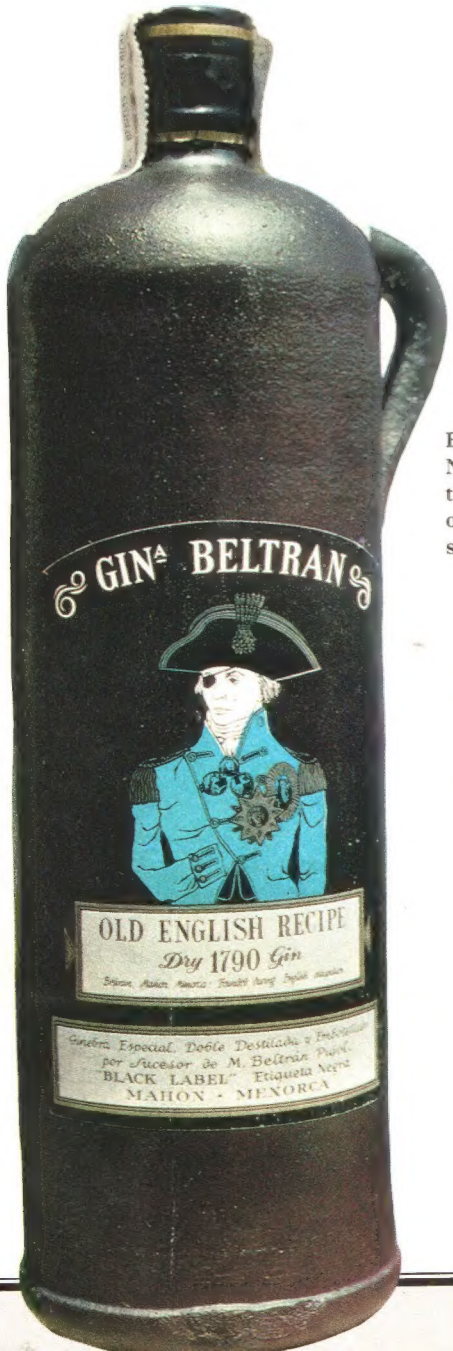
The story, however, was not quite over. In 1763 Britain gave up Cuba and the Philippines in order to regain Minorca. Lost in 1782 once more to the French, it was retaken after the Battle of the Nile at the end of the century. Then, in 1802, it passed back to Spain for good. Its return went almost unnoticed, for Britain had acquired Malta almost simultaneously – but, as these pictures show, reminders of the British presence are still to be found on the island.

An officer of the Minorca garrison departs on leave. The colonels of every regiment were absent when the French attacked in April, 1756.



This present-day highway runs along the route of Minorca's first road, linking Mahon and Ciudadela, which was built by Sir Richard Kane, governor of the island.

Golden Farm (above) was Admiral Nelson's residence in Minorca. From here he could survey his fleet at anchor in Port Mahon, while, it is said, awaiting the visits of Lady Hamilton. The house also provided Nelson (right) with sufficient leisure and comfort to work on his memoirs.



Beltran gin, produced with Nelson's blessing according to the original Plymouth formula, is one British legacy that Minorcans still enjoy today.

Guarded by its watchtower, the harbour of Mahon was a haven for 18th-Century warships.

had gone to war against France while Napoleon was in Egypt and the French had occupied the city). Vaubois was in a position to reply to Nelson's first demand for his surrender that Frenchmen did not understand the word: and to the second that he was resolved to defend the fortress to the last extremity.

Various half-hearted attempts were made by both sides to force a decision on land. The French made sorties against the Maltese lines and the Maltese replied by attempting to capture at least an outlying bastion. Both were too weak, the French in numbers, the Maltese in stamina. Increasingly, the Maltese turned to the British, who landed, with the consent of King Ferdinand, a thousand troops and a few naval guns. On February 9, 1799, the Maltese appointed one of Nelson's captains, Alexander Ball, as president and head of government. He organized the Maltese forces, reconciled their differences, and forwarded their petitions. It was primarily due to Ball, a man of great sympathies and outstanding diplomatic abilities, that the Maltese held out. His very appearance among them, we are told, stopped business in the market-place and evoked "reverential applause."

With the Maltese, Ball maintained an attitude strictly loyal to King Ferdinand, offering Malta only his "special and temporary protection." But in private he urged Nelson to annex Malta, arguing that the inhabitants would never be able to hold the island against a great power, and that "it will pay fourfold the expense of maintaining it by making it a great depot for British trade" when peace returned. British dominion was what the Maltese most desired. In March, 1799, they petitioned the King of Naples "to allow the sovereignty of Malta and the adjacent islands to be transferred to Britain," and in sending a copy of their petition to Nelson, they expressed their earnest wish "of soon becoming subjects and vassals of that great British nation." Meanwhile, they struggled on, obtaining just enough food for survival, while Vaubois and his men suffered during the long hot summer of 1800 from the tightening of the blockade. They began to eat the dogs, then the cats, then the rats of Valletta, to keep alive.

In these circumstances Malta could immediately have become British when Vaubois finally surrendered in September, 1800. His surviving men marched out of Valletta with all the honours of war and were allowed by the British to return to Marseilles, provided they did not take up arms again until an equivalent number of English prisoners were released.

But Malta was not to become officially British for a further 14 years. Nelson at this time saw no value in the island as a permanent possession, and his government looked upon it as nothing more than a bargaining counter. "To say the truth," Nelson wrote to the Admiralty, "the possession of Malta by England would be a useless and enormous expense. . . . I attach no value to it for us." He saw more purpose in retaining Minorca (which the English had captured in 1798). But Malta was too small and barren an island to be self-supporting, and too remote from both the eastern and western Mediterranean. "The Fleet can never go there," he wrote, "if I can find any other corner to put them in."

There was another reason. After the Battle of the Nile, in which he was badly wounded in the head, Nelson suffered from an attack of military lethargy, accentuated by his passion for Emma Hamilton. With his judgement diminished and his energies sapped, Nelson had allowed the blockade of Malta to be relaxed, and the French obtained supplies to prolong the siege.

The island's future was, in any case, decided at a higher level. The British wanted peace with Bonaparte, and they knew that peace was unobtainable so long as they remained in possession of Malta. Bonaparte did not share Nelson's view of its unimportance. He told the British ambassador that he would rather see the English in the Faubourg St. Antoine (a suburb of Paris) than in Malta.

A compromise was agreed whereby Malta should be returned to the Order of St. John under a joint guarantee by Britain, France, Austria, Russia, Spain and Prussia. It pleased Bonaparte because he knew that the Order was weak and discredited and would soon bow to his will; it pleased the Tsar of Russia because he had given sanctuary to the Order after its expulsion from Malta and had become its Grand Master; it satisfied the English because they were strangely unconcerned. The king of Naples was at the mercy of the French and likely to make terms with them. The Maltese were not even consulted.

When the rumour of the compromise peace reached Malta, there was an outcry in the islands against this "betrayal" by the English. The people viewed the return of the Order with profound distress. Not a single knight had come to Malta during the siege to help liberate it from the French, and if the Order were allowed to return the first to suffer would be the Maltese who had aided the French and later turned against them. As soon as it suited Bonaparte, he would be back in Malta as "protector" of the Order.

In February, 1802, the Maltese sent to London a six-man deputation to plead for the "perpetual protection" of the British. It pressed on Lord Hobart, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, the advantages to Britain "not merely of protecting Malta, but owning it." If England possessed Malta, she could be mistress of the Mediterranean. Let Alexander Ball be their governor: he was "a good and considerate man." But the Maltese arguments, at times almost lachrymose, met with a chilling response. The deputies succeeded in meeting King George III only by waylaying him one Sunday on his way back from church at Kew.

Lord Hobart told them kindly that the return of the Order was agreed upon and could not now be reconsidered. The British government could do no more than "take care of the happiness of the Maltese people." To incorporate the island in the British Empire was out of the question. "The abandonment of Malta," he said, "has become an indispensable sacrifice on the part of his Britannic Majesty in order to ensure a general peace." The Peace of Amiens (1802) which temporarily suspended Anglo-French hostilities and included the agreement on Malta, was signed while the delegation was still in London, and it returned home in despair.

The delegates' appeal, however, had a long-term effect. It soon became clear that the treaty was unworkable. The

Order was dispersed, bereft of its estates and income, hated and despised by the Maltese, beholden to the Tsar, and quite unable to exert any authority in the island or defend it against attack. In October, 1802, London ordered that the British evacuation of Malta was to cease.

Seven months later war with France broke out again, largely on account of Britain's continued occupation of the island – "Peace or war," declared Bonaparte, "depends upon Malta" – and it was only now that the British began to realize its great advantages. Nelson was the first to change his mind. "I now declare," he wrote in June, 1803, "that I consider Malta as a most important outwork to India, that it will give us great influence in the Levant and indeed all the southern parts of Italy. In this view, I hope that we shall never give it up." Commercially, Malta was seen to be an excellent staging-post, which, in 1806, became all the more important when Napoleon closed all European ports to British shipping.

So Malta came to Britain by a strange but not unparalleled combination of circumstances: a brilliant victory far from its shores, renunciation followed by second thoughts of self-interest, and the unanimous desire of its people for British protection. It remained for a few years a British protectorate. Ball went back to Malta as "Plenipotentiary to the Order of St. John" (the fiction of their restoration being temporarily maintained), a post which he held until his death in 1809. Early in 1814 Malta was declared to be a Crown Colony.

The great powers acknowledged British possession at the Treaty of Paris (1814), which stipulated that "the Island of Malta and its dependencies shall belong in full right and sovereignty to His Britannic Majesty." It was confirmed the next year at the Congress of Vienna. British ownership was now absolute. In his proclamation to the people, the first governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, declared: "It is His Majesty's gracious intention to recognize you as subjects of the British Crown, and in consequence he has accepted sovereignty of these possessions."

Malta is an island only 17 miles long by eight miles broad, and Gozo, which is separated from it by a four-mile channel, is eight miles by four. These tiny islands,

"King Tom" Maitland, first governor of Malta from 1813 to 1824, was an administrator with a decidedly regal manner.

smaller in total area than the Isle of Wight, were populated in the early 19th Century by 100,000 people, of whom 10,000 lived on Gozo. In the next 150 years the population increased threefold, making the area one of the most densely inhabited in the world. Because the land is not very fertile and its summer climate is torrid, every square yard of soil is guarded, and any person building a house on virgin ground must first remove the soil for use elsewhere. (In the days of the knights, soil was imported in shiploads from Sicily.)

The self-sufficient peasant economy universal in other Mediterranean countries was clearly impossible in Malta and local industries must fail because of their island site. Without other employment and constant imports of food, Malta must starve. Hence the island is highly vulnerable to fluctuations in trade, to changes in world strategy, and, in wartime, to siege. It has experienced decades of great prosperity and cataclysmic slumps. Its history is not its own but part of the history of greater powers who competed for its possession. Perhaps it was happiest, or at least felt most secure, when it formed part of two unchallenged empires, the Roman, and, in the 19th and 20th Centuries, the British.

From its earliest days Malta has been a strategic asset to any power which held it. It has one of the finest natural harbours in the world, with the capacity to anchor or berth the largest fleets. The Grand Harbour in Valletta is not a single deep-water bay, but an almost landlocked inlet of the sea divided internally by a series of creeks overlooked by tongues of rocky land on which the cities have been constructed. Under the knights these creeks became harbours for their galleys, and were eminently suitable for the building of waterside wharfs, workshops, ship-repairing yards and warehouses of increasing complexity.

The dense population of the islands has always supplied a large force of skilled dock-labour. The fortifications which the knights left behind as their supreme legacy did not become the ancient monuments of the 19th and 20th Centuries, but continued, even under air attack, to be bulwarks of security and formidable obstacles to every form of assault. They made excellent barracks for soldiers and sailors, and for the storage of their munitions and supplies. Besides that, the city of Valletta, and its later suburbs of Floriana and Sliema, provided every convenience of civilized life.

Its God-given, man-developed facilities are matched by its incomparable situation in mid-Mediterranean. It lies exactly half-way between the channels of access and egress, the Straits of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, 900 miles away in each direction. It dominates the narrowest part of the sea, as well, between Sicily and Tunisia. Before the days of air power, even before the days of steam power, this geographical coincidence was of vast strategic significance.

Malta could keep under surveillance the shortest route from southern Europe to northern Africa, and simultaneously prevent fleets from the eastern Mediterranean from penetrating to the western, and vice versa. It was an outlying defence of Sicily, an outpost for attack on Libya. Throughout history it has, therefore, played a dual role as a shield and a sword. In Homeric times it was already known as "the navel of the inland sea." "This cursed rock," said one of his advisers to Suleiman the Magnificent, "is like a barrier interposed between us and your possessions. If you will not decide to take it quickly, it will interrupt all com-

munications between Africa and Asia." Four hundred years later Rommel wrote, "With Malta in our hands the British would have had little chance of exercising any further control over convoy traffic in the central Mediterranean."

One tends to think of Malta in terms of war. But it has always been of equal importance to commerce. As a refuge in storm (as St. Paul discovered), as a revictualling port and later as a port for coaling and oiling, its situation has unequalled advantages. Under the British it came to be the strongest link in the chain of British-occupied stations on the route to the East – Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus, Alexandria, Suez, Aden, Ceylon. In compensation for its inability to export, Malta became the Mediterranean's chief entrepot for goods in transit: ships returning empty from the Levant discovered they could take on new cargo in Malta and the island rapidly became the exchange place of the sea. When the Suez Canal was opened for traffic in 1869, the number of ships calling at Malta rapidly increased. By 1880, 3,000 steamers visited it annually, as well as 2,000 ships of sail. During the 19th Century, after Waterloo, Malta was never attacked, nor under threat of attack. Its history is that of its expansion as a naval and mercantile base, and of British administration of the island. It can be summarized quite briefly.

The military garrison in mid-century was about 5,000, little larger than that which Napoleon had considered necessary to hold the island. The British added new coastal works to the island's defences and by 1850 the cliffs and fortifications were guarded by 332 pieces of artillery. But the main expenditure was on the naval base. The first dry dock was constructed in 1848, and by the outbreak of the First World War there were four more. The Grand Harbour became the headquarters of the British Mediterranean fleet. By 1904, ten capital ships were based there, and on shore there were 20,000 British soldiers and sailors. Malta was by far the most strongly defended and potentially aggressive of all the British colonies.

Slowly, the island was Anglicized. Neo-Gothic churches began to appear incongruously between the palaces of the knights, and red pillar-boxes stood at the ornamented street corners. A classic temple was raised in memory of Alexander Ball, and an opera house built at government expense in the centre of Valletta. A railway ran between the old capital, Medina, and the new.

In social life, too, Malta was exposed to British influence. A public school was founded, and English and Maltese families lived side by side in the newer suburbs. The flavour of mid-19th-Century Malta was well expressed by Edward Lear:

> "A Bishop and daughter, peas and artichokes, works in marble and filagree, red mullet, an Archdeacon, Mandarin oranges, Admirals and Generals, Marsala wine at 10d a bottle, religious processions, poodles, geraniums, balls, bacon, baboons, books and what not."

It is a scene of Mediterranean bustle, of cacophony, exuberance and colour, of smells sweet and sour, a sense of history, a sense of urgency, a sense of piety. But the Maltese were left in no doubt who was master. The social apartheid of British colonial rule applied to Malta as rigidly as to Ceylon, and Maltese officers and gentlemen, even those of impeccable

Valletta's Grand Harbour bustles with activity as local traders set off from the waterfront in dgħaisas, the Maltese equivalent of gondolas, to visit some newly arrived British ships in 1818.

lineage, were not admitted to British clubs.

At intervals throughout the British occupation, the undercurrent of political protest became too strong to be ignored. Thomas Maitland – "King Tom" – who also ruled in Corfu and "bestrode the Mediterranean like a colossus," was not a man to take kindly to popular representation on his council. All that the people needed were peace and prosperity, and the British would provide both. A popular assembly, he considered, would be composed of fanatics. If he wished, the governor could be "advised" by a committee of Maltese, but "King Tom" did not so wish.

By 1835 more democratic ideas prevailed. There was to be a governor's council of seven members of whom the Maltese could appoint three; and in 1849 it was enlarged to 15 members, of whom seven were popularly elected. It was not until 1887 that the elected members held a majority, but we hear of governors who would ring the division bell as soon as a "strutter" rose to speak.

By 1900 only 10,000 Maltese held the right to vote, and of these (the British noted with satisfied complacency) only half bothered to exercise their right. In 1909 Malta was given full self-government "in all matters of purely local concern." It was a formula easy to evade, for who was to say where local interests ended and imperial interests began?

The main controversies that arose between the British and Maltese were concerned not with the constitutional or imperial interests of the occupying power, but with the position of the Catholic Church, and, curiously but more important, with the language. The British can claim to have had a good record of religious tolerance in their colonies, and Malta was no exception. Roman Catholicism was acknowledged as the official religion of the islands, and the Archbishop of Malta occupied in precedence a position second only to the governor.

For over a century there was harmony between Church and State, but in 1930 the Archbishop considered that Lord Strickland's premiership was hostile to ecclesiastical interests and issued a famous warning to the people that any Maltese who voted for Strickland's party in the forthcoming elections would be guilty of "a grave sin" and be denied the consolations of the sacrament.

The British government in London emphatically protested to the Holy See against this interference with the democratic liberty of electors in a British colony, but the Pope upheld his Archbishop's decree, and the election was cancelled and the constitution temporarily suspended.

This momentary dispute with the Church was as nothing compared to the language controversy which dominated Malta's politics for over a century. The language spoken by every class in the island was Maltese, a very old language based on the Punic tongue of Hannibal's Carthage, later interpenetrated by some Arabic and Sicilian words. It was unknown outside the island, and although it was never a written language until some 120 years ago, and hence had no ancient literature, it was an important element in Maltese culture and in maintaining a sense of national identity.

As Maltese could not be written down, Italian had come to be the language commonly used in the Church, courts of

law and the university, and after the British occupation, English became the customary language of commerce. It was plainly absurd that three languages should coexist in so small a place, and it outraged the British sense of justice that the islanders should be required to plead for their liberties, and even for their lives, in a language (Italian) which only 15 per cent of the population could understand.

They attempted by degrees to introduce English as the language for all official purposes and gave it priority in the schools. The difficulty is illustrated by the printing of schoolbooks in the Maltese language (in Roman characters, since few children could follow the more correct Arabic), with translations into English interlined in a different type. In the university at Valletta most of the textbooks were English, but many of the lectures were given in Italian, while between themselves the students spoke nothing but Maltese.

The attempts to introduce English as the official language were strongly resisted by some of the better-educated classes in favour of the traditional Italian, and their protests were supported and complicated by Mussolini's claim that Malta was historically an Italian island.

The British tried to resolve the difficulty by ruling that only Maltese and English should be taught in elementary schools, and Italian as a second language in secondary schools, but the Maltese evaded the rule, and the controversy led to such bitter recriminations between Maltese parties and between the Maltese government and the British, that the constitution was again suspended in 1933, and the Maltese language was made obligatory for use in the courts. Internal self-government was not restored until after the end of the Second World War.

This brief summary of the political and religious difficulties has interrupted the story of Malta in the mid-19th and early 20th Centuries. During this period Malta enjoyed a prosperous and relatively peaceful time. In the Crimean War the island was an important supply and staging base and a hospital for the sick and wounded. In the First World War she lay far from the scenes of major action, but again fulfilled her traditional role as a transit and storage base. She was a haven for the Gallipoli and Salonika campaigners, providing 25,000 sick-beds and thereby earning for herself the sobriquet of "Nurse of the Mediterranean."

In the post-war period Malta resumed her place as the fleet's main base outside the United Kingdom, providing in 1929 accommodation for 86 naval vessels (the greatest single naval force then in existence) and 21,000 soldiers. Despite the two suspensions of the constitution in the 1930s, and the subjection of the islanders to Mussolini's incessant propaganda that Malta rightly belonged to Italy, relations between Maltese and British were not seriously affected. Mussolini's threat to invade Malta during the Abyssinian crisis led to the island's being put on a war basis, but because it had no air-defences the whole British fleet withdrew to Alexandria; with the exception of a small minority, the islanders remained staunchly pro-British, as a far greater test of their loyalty to the Crown was soon to prove.

Four hundred years from now the story of Malta in the Second World War will be as celebrated as the Great Siege of 1565 is to us. Though the Great Siege was primarily a land battle, and the siege of 1940–42 an air and naval battle, the two had much in common: the greatness of the prize, the courage of besiegers and besieged, the island's dependence for its survival on food reaching it from outside, and the enthusiastic collaboration of the Maltese with the occupying power, the Knights of St. John in 1565, the British in the 1940s.

In the Second World War Malta's endurance and victory were even more remarkable than in the 16th Century

because she hardly ceased to strike at her enemies far from her shores while defending herself from close-range attack. In that sense, in fact, it is wrong to speak of the events of 1940–42 as a siege at all. They constituted a prolonged battle on the largest scale. It was an air battle over the island and the seas around it; but it was also a battle for the domination of the central Mediterranean. Can one truly speak of a "siege" when the besieged were able to wreck enemy harbours and convoys a thousand miles away?

As Malta's ordeal developed, each side saw the island as a piece of grit. To the British it was the grit in an oyster shell which becomes a pearl; to their enemies it was grit in the eye. Marshal Ugo Cavallero, the Italian chief of the general staff, said, "I consider the capture of Malta absolutely essential for the future development of the war"; and Churchill remarked on many occasions, "The loss of Malta would be a disaster of the first magnitude to the British Empire."

It is, therefore, surprising to read in strategic studies written before the outbreak of war that in the event of hostilities with both Axis powers, Malta must be abandoned. The Royal Air Force considered that its nearness to Sicilian airfields (only 30 minutes flying time away) rendered it indefensible. Dockyards, ships at anchor, air defences and civilian morale would be pulverized by sustained air attack, and to supply the island and garrison it against invasion would impose far too great a strain on British resources.

The War Office agreed. Only the Royal Navy argued for defending Malta at all costs, but it was, paradoxically, the Navy, alone of the three services, which withdrew its main armament (once again to Egypt) when war actually occurred. In view of this uncertain pre-war strategy no proper preparations were made to defend Malta. In one sense, of course, it still had the finest defences in the world and the finest facilities for the Army and the Fleet. But the battle of Malta would be fought in a new element – the air – and it was here that the deficiencies of the island's defences were most obvious and in retrospect, most inexcusable.

There were but two airfields in May 1940, and a third which was unfinished. There were no air-raid shelters for the civilian population and no reserve stocks of food. There were no pens to protect aircraft on the ground, no underground storage for their fuel. The anti-aircraft defences were lamentable, there was one unreliable radar station, and no thought had been given to shielding the Grand Harbour by smoke screens. Worst of all the only fighter aircraft available were four Gloster Gladiators, virtually obsolete Naval fighter bi-planes, which lay crated in an obscure storeroom until discovered just before zero hour struck.

When Italy entered the war on June 10 1940, all thought of abandoning Malta was forgotten. It came to play its key role by demonstrating that it had a key role to play. It emulated in the Mediterranean the contemporary air battle over Britain. When attacked it fought back with its three surviving Gladiators (the fourth was destroyed in the first Italian raid on June 11), and the Maltese named them with that gentle humour that was to sustain the population during the next two years, *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*. (The skeleton of *Faith* can still be seen today in a Malta museum.)

For nearly a month these three, flown by flying-boat pilots – for the R.A.F. had no presence on the island at the time – held off the attacks of 200 Italian aircraft based on Sicily with such effect that the Italians reported that there must be at least 25 fighters on the island, though they could count but three in the air at a time. Four hundred volunteers were called for to man the few anti-aircraft guns: 5,000 came forward. "By the skin of its teeth," wrote Churchill, "Malta survived." Why she did is not entirely clear, but the answer appears to lie with Mussolini

In one of the earliest photographs of Malta, taken in 1860, British ships of the line – almost unchanged since Nelson's day – ride at anchor in Grand Harbour.

The Duce was a gambler, fooled by the mirages of his "victory" in France, incapable in his grandiose schemes of any real practical calculation, bemused by imperial dreams and vastly overrating himself compared to Hitler.

Official Italian archives also make it clear that Italy did not have the resources for a successful invasion of Malta. The men were not available; the parachutists were not trained; the ships did not exist, the landing-craft, for instance, being still only on the drawing-boards; and the air force had nothing like the requisite number of planes. Nor was the Italian fleet, especially after the Battle of Taranto in November, 1940, anxious for a further confrontation with the Royal Navy. In 1940, Malta underwent 210 alerts from the Italian air force: about one half were followed by bombing attacks, but the total civilian casualties were only 12 in July, none in August, five in September and none at all during the rest of the year.

The six-months' respite enabled the British and Maltese to make good the neglect of the previous decade. *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* were reinforced by four, then a dozen, and later a hundred modern fighters. The third airfield was completed, and a huge network of taxiways and dispersal points constructed around all three. Forty heavy and many light anti-aircraft guns were moved into position. In August, 1940, the first convoy of the war docked, unscathed, in the harbour, landing stores of all kinds and 2,000 more troops.

The beaches, the cliff-tops, the farmland of the interior were strung with mines and wire. A Home Guard was formed, armed, as in Britain, mainly with sporting rifles. The golf-course and polo grounds were ploughed up for crops. Huge public shelters lit by electricity and supplied with water, were excavated in the easily quarried limestone, and by May, 1941, were providing refuge for 150,000 people, while individuals were encouraged to chip for themselves family shelters outside their homes.

Malta was thus well prepared for the second onslaught which came early in 1941. This time it was German. Hitler moved to Sicily a complete air fleet, composed of 60 dive-bombers (Stukas), 80 long-range bombers and many fighters. Adding these to the part of the Italian air force which had not been diverted to Libya, the enemy now had 250 aircraft, while Malta had but 60 left of all types. The Luftwaffe's first target was the aircraft-carrier, H.M.S. *Illustrious*. She was attacked off Malta by the Stukas, losing her steering and flying off her fighters, which refuelled in Malta and returned to escort and protect their mother-ship as she limped into harbour. It was an incident that was to become typical of many.

On the island itself, the German attacks concentrated on the harbours and airfields. So fiercely did the Luftwaffe press home its attacks, and so resolute was the defence, that the gunners tore their anti-aircraft guns from their mountings to depress the barrels low enough to shoot downwards at the Stukas streaking below them inland from the harbour mouth to finish off the *Illustrious*. The Stukas never succeeded, since the ship was repaired in Malta and escaped to Alexandria a month later. The raids were resumed at night – every night – throughout the winter, and as Malta had no night fighters, the searchlights illuminated the attacking aircraft as pointers for the Hurricanes to shoot them down.

In the spring of 1941 Malta had its second reprieve: the greater part of the German air fleet was withdrawn from Sicily for the conquest of Greece and Crete. The ports and airfields had remained fully operational and the repair-shops had never been out of action for more than a few days at a time. The value of the rock-shelters was reflected by the relatively low civilian casualty figures: no more than 350 in the whole of 1941. But the greatest ordeal was still to come.

During the two and a half years of the air siege, the British high command was faced in Malta by four main problems: sustaining the island's offensive role in the Mediterranean war; safeguarding her against expected invasion; protecting her against almost continuous air-attack; and saving her from starvation. All four problems were interconnected and concurrent, but to describe each move as it occurred would result in a confusing narrative. To break the strict chronology and deal with each of its four elements in turn will give a better idea of the enormous importance of Malta's struggle.

Malta lay at the cross-lanes of sea and air traffic. She could not by herself keep open for the Allies the west–east route from Gibraltar to Alexandria once the surface fleet was withdrawn, though she was an important staging-post for air traffic. But the enemy's ships and aircraft must also pass close to Malta in their passage to North Africa, particularly Tripoli, Rommel's main port for reinforcement and supply. If this traffic could be seriously impeded by air and submarine attack from Malta, Rommel's military capability would be crippled.

It was not simply a question of sinking his ships at sea and shooting down his transport planes in flight, but also of attacking them in Sicilian and Italian ports and airfields before they started, and in African ports of discharge if some succeeded in slipping through, wrecking their storage, impeding their loading and inducing in the Axis forces a sense of wasted, costly effort and despair.

Malta was also perfectly situated to keep a watch on Axis movements of all kinds: she was a forward base for reconnaissance, the eyes of the Eighth Army in Egypt and Cyrenaica and of the fleet at Alexandria, a periscope which could peer into enemy secrets from Naples to Athens and Benghazi. At the outbreak of the Italian war no bombers were based on Malta and no reconnaissance planes, nor were there any shelter-pens for submarines. (The latter had been proposed in 1937, but turned down by the British cabinet as too expensive – £300,000, the cost of a single submarine!) Once the Italian war had started, the equipment began to flow in rapidly: Wellington bombers for attacking the enemy's Mediterranean ports; Swordfish and Blenheims for short-range attack on shipping; Glenn Martins for photographic reconnaissance. Submarines were based on Malta throughout the war, and for short periods at a time destroyers and cruisers were able to make use of Malta's harbour for surface-raiding.

The reaction of the enemy to this mounting sea and air offensive was to divert to the subjugation of the island an important part of their air and naval forces. So seriously was the menace of Malta taken that, even when Moscow

was under greatest pressure in the early winter of 1941–42, Hitler thought it necessary to withdraw aircraft from the Russian front to keep this Mediterranean gadfly under control. Malta's success in interrupting Rommel's supplies varied with the intensity of the attacks upon her. There was a time in the winter of 1941–42 when she could do little more than look after herself, and then Rommel received all he needed for his desert offensive. The stores landed at Tripoli in January, 1942, for instance, exceeded 60,000 tons, and losses were negligible.

In August, 1941, however, 25 per cent of Rommel's supplies and reinforcements had been sunk by Malta-based aircraft and ships; in September the percentage was 40; in October, 63; in November, 77.

On November 9 the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, wrote in his diary: "Since September 19 we had given up trying to get convoys through to Libya; every attempt had been paid for at a high price. . . . Tonight we tried it again. A convoy of seven ships left, accompanied by two ten-thousand-ton cruisers and ten destroyers. . . . All – I mean *all* – our ships were sunk."

The Germans then belatedly diverted U-boats from the Atlantic and sent more aeroplanes to Sicily. The losses of the British Navy increased immediately and the aerial bombardment of Malta was incessant. By the end of 1941, Rommel was preparing for his push into Egypt – but the effort required of the Axis to protect their convoys was so huge that they naturally began to contemplate an invasion of Malta, with the object of finally eliminating the nuisance

During the Second World War, Malta's central position in the Mediterranean made the island a focal point in the struggle for North Africa.

HIS MAJESTY'S DEVOTED ISLAND

In 1941 the Maltese were well aware of what their island owed to Britain: almost a century and a half of peace and prosperity. They more than repaid this in the next two years, as night after night, Italian and German bombers evaded the searchlights, seen here surrounding Floriana Cathedral, to drop their lethal loads on the island. For weeks on end, the Maltese faced starvation as convoys disintegrated under enemy attacks. Yet they not only survived, but fought back. As King George VI said on awarding Malta the George Cross – a unique honour – the island displayed "a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history."

Maltese Go to Ground

Soon after the first bombs whistled down at dawn, on June 11, 1940, the Maltese found reason to be grateful for the geological chance that had given their island a core of soft limestone.

This could be easily worked and it hardened on exposure to the air. The Knights of St. John had used it four centuries before to construct a honeycomb of defensive galleries and tunnels deep beneath the capital.

Now these were made habitable once more. The Maltese were issued with picks and exhorted by posters to "Dig for yourself, dig for your family, dig for your friends." Large public shelters were also rapidly excavated.

Individuals were permitted, however, upon payment of a one-shilling-a-year "encroachment fee," to hack out private cubicles leading off the main public area. By the end of the war every Maltese could "go to ground."

Although 10,000 tons of bombs rained down on the island during the first four months of 1942 alone, destroying or damaging 40,000 buildings, civilian casualties were remarkably light. Deaths throughout the siege totalled no more than 1,500. Malta's bombproof shield of limestone had saved the island's inhabitants from worse agonies.

A Maltese civilian cuts a shelter for his family out of the soft limestone.

Mothers and children adapt to the rigours of communal living in a disused railway tunnel. It was the only public shelter providing bunks – some 1,500 of them.

Streets of Palaces Laid Waste

In all, 16,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Malta. In April, 1942, alone, the equivalent of 36 of the attacks on Coventry took place. Time after time, when the all-clear sounded, the Maltese emerged from under ground to find their cities further reduced to ruins.

The "Streets of Palaces" that Disraeli had so admired when he visited Valletta in 1830, became a rubble of the huge stone blocks that are typical of Malta's larger buildings. By 1943, many of the island's historic buildings no longer existed. Against all odds, the Maltese kept on at their jobs, repairing ships in the dockyard, refuelling aircraft on the bases their morale unaffected. Perhaps this was due to their religious faith.

They prayed constantly, imploring the Blessed Virgin to "gather up the bombs in your great mantle." Or perhaps it was their sense of humour. After one air-raid they found Valletta's Palace Square covered with seaweed, which had been scattered by a German bomb from the palace roof, where it had lain as insulation since the 18th Century. The crowd simply burst out laughing.

Maltese housewives queue for water from an improvised supply after bombs have destroyed the mains system. Despite the hours of waiting, they remain characteristically cheerful.

A parishioner helps an Orthodox priest to search for the Blessed Sacrament among the ruins of his shattered church. Erected in 1576, the building was totally destroyed in April, 1942.

Volunteers bring some order out of the chaos in South Street, Valletta, after the 2,300th raid. There would have been more damage but for the solid stone construction.

e *Victorious* (background) follows in line
other carriers – the *Eagle* (left) and the
domitable – in Operation Pedestal. On
gust 15, 1942, the *Eagle* was sunk and the
after the *Indomitable* was damaged.

Those in Peril on the Sea

Every household in the island prayed nightly for their fighting friends at sea. At stake was the outcome of the North Africa campaign, for Rommel's Afrika Korps depended for its survival on the ability of the Italian convoys to keep it supplied with fuel and ammunition.

And the fate of those convoys depended on Malta's ability to take the offensive. Like corsairs of old, British fighters, bombers and submarines struck out from Malta at Rommel's lifeline, severing it for long periods. By August, 1942, 38 per cent of his supplies were being lost at sea. In this battle for supplies, it was equally important that British convoys reached Malta in order to sustain her offensive role. But from January, 1942, scarcely anything did, and by the summer the island's very survival was at stake. Her fate now depended on the success or failure of a massive convoy, code-named Pedestal, of 14 merchant ships escorted by 59 warships, that set out in August from Gibraltar. En route, the carrier *Eagle* and half the merchantmen fell victims to Axis torpedoes.

The tanker *Ohio*, carrying 11,000 tons of vital fuel, was so stricken that she had to be taken under tow, an operation that for two days hung in the balance.

The Salvation of Malta

By June 20, 1942, the Axis blockade was bringing Malta close to starvation. The Lieutenant-Governor's voice crackled over Malta's wireless: "The time for which our bread can be made to last . . . I shall call the Target Date. I cannot tell you what that date is."

All he could say was that much stricter rationing was necessary. In fact, the date was the first week in September, little more than two months away. Malta's position had become so desperate because of her traditional dependence on imported supplies. Indeed, the island produced less food for itself in 1940 than in 1918. By mid-summer the situation was so critical that mothers and children suffering from malnutrition were flown secretly to Cairo in R.A.F. bombers. Finally, on August 15, at the end of a cycle of nine days' prayer, the first supply ships struggled into Grand Harbour with just three weeks of grace to spare before the island's remaining food ran out. The surging crowds cheered and wept with joy. People crossed themselves thanking God and proclaiming a miracle. Malta was saved.

After enduring days of punishment in Operation Pedestal, the tanker *Ohio* limps into Grand Harbour on August 16, 1942, lashed to the destroyer *Bramham*.

Girls carry home the daily meal from a "victory kitchen." These were introduced as a vital economy measure and guaranteed, as one leading resident cheerfully put it, that everyone would "starve equally."

Soldiers, working under constant threat of air-attack, unload foodstuffs in July, 1942. Although 30 ships had sailed for the island since January, only ten struggled through. Three of these were sunk at their moorings before they could be fully unloaded.

The King's Award

King George VI had in mind a civilian equivalent of the Victoria Cross when, in September, 1940, he instituted the George Cross for "supreme gallantry" in connection with the war. On April 15, 1942, the King created a precedent when he awarded the George Cross to the island of Malta, making them the first community within the British Empire to be honoured collectively by the bestowal of a British decoration.

In the spring of 1942, when the air-raids were at their worst and the long-threatened Axis invasion was expected at any minute, the King's announcement honouring Malta's "brave people" was a great morale booster. Never had the Maltese people felt so close to their monarch. On June 10 of the following year, 1943, when King George arrived in the islands, he was given a jubilant welcome. That same year, the George Cross was incorporated into the Maltese coat of arms and henceforth the islands were proud to be known as Malta, G.C.

In the spring sunshine of 1942 an old campaigner and his young friend look delightedly at a photograph of the George Cross, which the King has just conferred on their island.

King George VI is shown around Senglea, the worst-blitzed area of Malta, by its parish priest during the royal visit in the summer of 1943.

One Maltese watching the royal procession in June, 1943, wears a Union Jack pullover, proudly displaying that loyalty to the Crown so evident throughout the war years.

III. Malta Takes Her Revenge

The possibility of an invasion of Malta was, of course, obvious to the British, and they had made careful preparations to meet the threat. For the Axis, an invasion was clearly a stupendous operation of war, greater even than the capture of Crete. The ground, coastal and anti-aircraft defences were now very strong, and much of Malta's narrow countryside is criss-crossed by stone field-walls which would have made the landing of gliders and the movement of troops under intense machine-gun fire extremely hazardous.

There were 30,000 soldiers and airmen on the island and 700 pieces of artillery. Rommel, nevertheless, thought that the invasion should be attempted and offered to lead it himself. So did General Kurt Student, the victor of Crete. Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, commander-in-chief, south, and Grand Admiral Raeder were both in favour of it, and the Italians began to train an expeditionary force.

Hitler and the German supreme command were less enthusiastic. In part, this was due to Hitler's ignorance of naval warfare and his comparative indifference to the Mediterranean campaign, which he still considered primarily an Italian one. He also distrusted Italian competence and was unwilling to expose his only airborne division to another holocaust such as Crete. Although an invasion was not finally ruled out, it was decided that a Luftwaffe assault should be launched on the island as a preliminary.

This began on December 21, 1941, and led to the dramatic improvement in Rommel's supply position already referred to. The attack he launched on January 21, 1942, succeeded beyond his expectations: the over-extended British Eighth Army was soon in full retreat and by February 6 was back on the Gazala–Bir Hacheim line, west of Tobruk, where the situation was stabilized until May. It was clear by now to the Italian high command, as well as to Kesselring, that the capture of Malta was necessary to secure the lines of communication across the Mediterranean. But Hitler and the supreme command were still unwilling to commit the necessary forces and an all-out Luftwaffe assault to neutralize the island was ordered. It was expected that three weeks would be enough. Greatly intensified raids on Malta took place in February, 1942, and truly massive raids followed in March. By the end of April the British 10th Submarine Flotilla, which had continued to harass the Libyan convoy route, was forced to abandon the island for fear of being trapped in port by mines laid in the approaches. The British aim was now simply to keep Malta alive and fighting.

On April 12 the superintendent of the Malta dockyard reported that they were virtually inoperable. Between the 15th and 30th there were 115 Axis raids on the island; an average of 170 bombers attacked daily. A reinforcement of 46 Spitfires had been flown in from the U.S. carrier, *Wasp*, on the 20th: three days later almost all had been either destroyed or damaged and only six serviceable fighters remained. And by May 10 all the submarines had left, not to return for three months. It is hardly surprising that Kesselring believed Malta was no longer a threat to Axis convoys. The Italians were far less confident. They assessed the results of the grand assault as good, but the neutralization of the island as only partial and temporary, and urged that a continued and increased blockade was necessary.

Their assessment was more accurate than Kesselring's. On May 9, 60 Spitfires reached the island from the carriers *Wasp* and *Eagle*. This time the ground crews were prepared: although the Spitfires arrived in the middle of a raid they were so speedily refuelled that some were off the ground and in action within 35 minutes of arrival. The next day Kesselring reported to Berlin that "the neutralization of Malta is complete." It was the day on which, for the first time in many months, the enemy encountered a superior British fighter force.

A plan for the invasion of Malta had, however, been drawn up. On April 21, 1942, the German general staff had finally agreed in principle to the idea. The Italians had kept pressing it and in March Hitler had, sceptically, assented. On April 29 political discussions between the Axis leaders had taken place at Salzburg and were followed the next day by military discussions at Berchtesgaden. The main item on the agenda was the relation between the planned operation against Malta and the opening offensive toward the Nile delta.

The Italian chief of general staff, Cavallero, contended that Malta should be taken before the march on Tobruk. The Germans insisted that Tobruk should be captured first and Axis forces reach at least the Egyptian border; otherwise, they argued, the British would take the initiative in the desert with the probably decisive support of the Royal Air Force based on Malta.

As usual, Cavallero was forced to accept the German alternative. Starting at the end of May Rommel was to move, in a two-weeks campaign, against Tobruk and up to the Egyptian frontier. "Operation Hercules," the air-sea attack on Malta, would then begin; it was timed for launching on July 10.

Cavallero reported the debate in his diary:

"As to Malta, the Fuehrer is of the opinion that it must be taken from the British. I point out the difficulties in regard to means and preparations to such an end. The Fuehrer envisages an operation based on the use of troops landed from gliders, who will pave the way for parachutists. . . . As an item of curiosity, I show the Fuehrer Napoleon's plan of 1798 for the conquest of the island."

Rommel launched his offensive on May 26, by which date the Axis was losing the convoy battle in the central Mediterranean and Malta was being reinforced, although at heavy sacrifice. Rommel's advance was more rapid than even he had anticipated and on June 21 Tobruk surrendered (and Rommel was immediately promoted to field-marshal).

On the following day Mussolini told Cavallero to issue orders limiting the Axis advance to the Egyptian frontier line and withdrawing some of the air force for the Malta operation. Axis forces in North Africa were subject to the Italian *Comando Supremo* and on June 23 Rommel received Mussolini's directions. The Field-Marshal thereupon bypassed the *Comando Supremo* and radioed the German supreme command:

"The morale and condition of the troops, the quantity of stores captured and the present weakness of the enemy

make it possible for us to thrust onwards into the heart of Egypt. Therefore request that the Duce be prevailed upon to remove the present restrictions on movement and that all troops now under my command be placed at my disposal to continue the offensive."

The Italian high command was less optimistic, but Cavallero was told that the German command supported Rommel. Hitler wrote to Mussolini on the same day (June 23): "The goddess of fortune passes only once close to warriors in battle. Anyone who does not grasp her at that moment can very often never touch her again."

This was the firm confirmation that Hitler had personally ordered the abandonment of the Malta operation. Mussolini acquiesced, as did the Italian high command (which was less sanguine than Rommel) and Cavallero agreed to a renewed offensive in Egypt, simultaneously warning the Duce that supply difficulties must be expected. Rommel had forgotten, in the elation of victory, his own warning to Berlin in February, 1941, when he took up his command: "Without Malta the Axis will end by losing control of North Africa." His post-Tobruk campaigns proved that this view had been right. Between July 15 and 21 the Eighth Army struck back. The attacks were sufficiently powerful to make Rommel report that "if the enemy succeeds in penetrating any farther, our Alamein position will become untenable."

He asked for reinforcements and among those rushed to him were German and Italian airborne regiments which had been mustered in Sicily for the invasion of Malta. On July 20 Mussolini, who had flown to Cyrenaica to await a triumphal entry into Egypt (he had taken with him a sword modelled on a Crusader pattern and had been given a white horse), returned home. On the next day "Operation Hercules" was finally cancelled.

The Germans were never quite able to understand how Malta had held out. The resistance is explicable only by the great efforts made by the Allies to replace her defending aircraft as fast as they were destroyed and by the indomitable will of the people.

Hurricanes, and in April and May, 1942, for the first time, Spitfires, were flown into the island from both British and American carriers. In April, 1942, 150 fighters were destroyed over Malta or on the ground. All three main airfields were battered to mud and rubble and were temporarily abandoned for emergency landing-strips. Against 600 German and Italian aircraft in Sicily, Malta could muster by the end of April only 30.

But the flow of replacements gave the island a bare margin of resistance. In the first four months of 1942, the peak of Malta's ordeal, there were 3,340 separate air-raid alerts, and 10,000 tons of bombs fell on the island, a high proportion of them on Senglea and Vittoriosa. Forty thousand buildings were destroyed or damaged. For months there was no electricity or gas. All shops were closed, for there was nothing to sell.

But the people suffered more from homelessness, sleeplessness and hunger than from death or wounds. The total civilian deaths throughout the siege were 1,500. The cities, being built of stone, were almost immune to fire risks, and the shelters were strong and capacious. Fifty thousand people were evacuated to less hard-pressed corners of the island.

Malta, however, was slowly starving, and with hunger came disease. The population was strictly rationed to half its normal diet, some 1,600 calories a day, and every person in the island lost some two or three stone in weight.

"Victory kitchens" were introduced for mass-feeding in order to economize on food and fuel – ". . . so that everyone should starve equally," as Mabel Strickland, daughter of Lord Strickland, cheerfully put it – but they provided only one meal a day, cooked with timber salvaged from the bombed buildings, and it could be as meagre as one thin sausage or a scrap of goat's meat, a handful of peas and a little bread.

There was no milk, except what was brought in by submarine in powdered form for young mothers and children, and water for washing was rationed to half a bucket per week per family. Inevitably, there was a black market. A suite of furniture would be exchanged for a dozen eggs; gold-fish from the governor's ornamental ponds sold for 1s. 9d. apiece. .

Life continued much as it did in London during the 1940 Blitz. There was no panic; no fall in morale, except temporarily among the dock-workers, who were hardest hit; no thought of surrender, except among high officials who alone knew how grave the situation was.

The leader and spokesman of the people was the governor, General Sir William Dobbie – "a Cromwellian figure in a key point," as Churchill wrote of him later – who, in almost nightly broadcasts, sustained their spirits and defiance with good humour and his certainty of divine assistance, which made a great appeal to the religious Maltese. Tragically, this strong, God-fearing man succumbed to the ordeal when it was almost over. He was taken off the island in April, 1942, sick and infinitely weary, and Lord Gort, V.C. the governor of Gibraltar, arrived to fill his place.

Gort brought with him to Malta the George Cross which, on April 15, King George VI conferred collectively on the island in the following words: "To honour her brave people, I award the George Cross to the Island Fortress of Malta, to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history."

It was the first time that a part of the British Empire was honoured in this fashion, and it remains without parallel. The medal was formally presented on September 13 – and was taken round like an ikon to every village in the island. Gort's proposal that the Union Jack should be flown night and day until the siege was ended was disallowed in London by less imaginative minds.

The greatest of all the British problems was to maintain the regular provisioning of Malta. The convoys which were run to Malta from both ends of the Mediterranean were among the greatest naval operations of the war. Each involved a major fleet movement and a major air battle, and the losses were appalling. In 1941, of 31 merchant ships which set out, 30 reached her safely. But in the first seven months of 1942, of the 30 ships which sailed to her relief, ten were sunk at sea, ten turned back badly damaged, and only ten actually reached Malta, of which three were sunk at their moorings in harbour before they had been fully unloaded.

The loss of naval ships was in the same

terrible proportion. Between the regular convoys fast mine-layers and submarines brought in minimum supplies, but only the great convoys could save Malta. In April, 1942, shortly before he left the island, Dobbie reported to Churchill that "it is obvious that the very worst may happen [surrender] if we cannot replenish our vital needs, especially flour and ammunition, and that very soon." Supplies, he forecast, could not last beyond mid-June. It was in these desperate circumstances that the most famous of all the Malta convoys, "Pedestal," was mounted in August, 1942. The scale of it was vast. The escort to the 14 fast merchant-ships included two battleships(*Nelson* and *Rodney*), three large aircraft-carriers, seven cruisers, 32 destroyers and eight submarines.

They entered the Mediterranean direct from the Clyde, and came under attack next day. From August 11 to 13 the convoy was under brutal attack. The carrier *Eagle* was sunk by a U-boat, the carrier *Indomitable* was badly damaged, and two cruisers and eight merchant ships were lost. A further three merchant ships and two cruisers were damaged.

The huge tanker *Ohio* was so badly hit that she was abandoned, then reboarded and helped into Malta with her priceless cargo of aviation fuel, which was pumped out of her as she slowly sank to the seabed at her moorings. Only four other merchant ships joined her at Valletta. Nine were totally lost. As the surviving ships limped in one by one, they were greeted by bands playing *Rule Britannia*, and the Barraca and other points of vantage were black with wildly cheering Maltese. "Pedestal" saved Malta. It landed 32,000 tons of supplies and 15,000 tons of fuel, an invaluable but short-lived blood transfusion. Other convoys reached Malta later in the year, but their losses were lighter, and Malta's long ordeal was almost at an end.

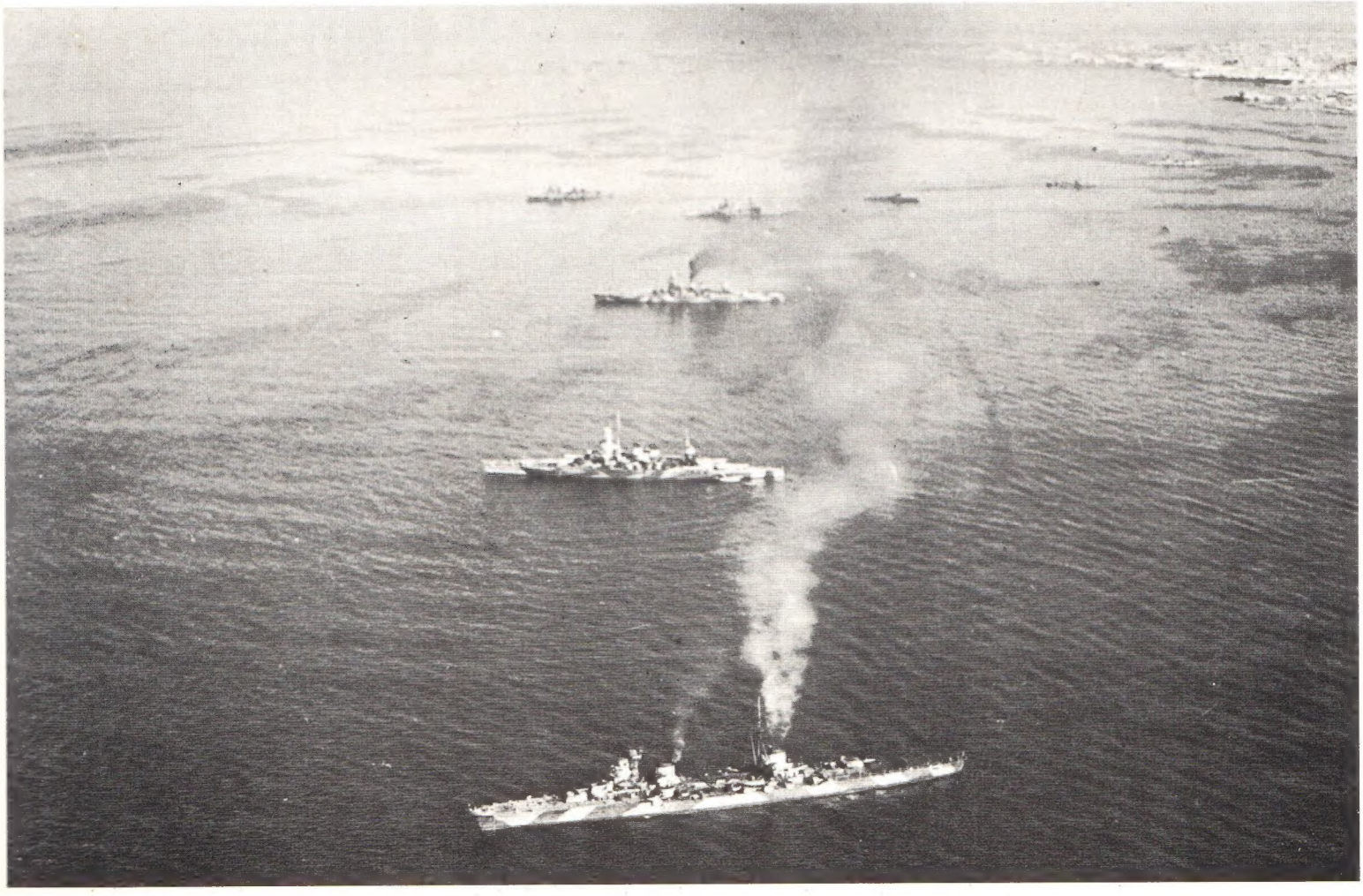
The Battle of Alamein in November, 1942, preserved Malta for Britain just as Nelson's Battle of the Nile had ultimately been the cause of her acquiring it. As soon as the northern airfields of Africa were in British hands, the convoys could be protected.

Between April and August, 1942, Malta had been able to contribute little to the struggle but her own defence. Now she resumed her offensive role, though subjected to constant air-attack for the remainder of the year, and in the final stages of Alexander's triumph in Tunisia she ravaged enemy shipping and air transport with a zeal that came from the knowledge that she had survived.

Malta's reward came in a form even more tangible than the George Cross, when she provided the headquarters for the invasion of Sicily in July, 1943. Safe at last from attack, she became the nerve-centre of the greatest amphibious operation so far ever seen. From her rebuilt airfields and a landing-strip constructed by American engineers on Gozo and used only for a few days, her aircraft cleared the way for the armada, much of which sailed from the Grand Harbour itself.

On September 11, 1943, the Italian fleet steamed under escort into that same harbour, and the British Mediterranean Fleet Commander, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, echoing Nelson's famous message after the Battle of the Nile, signalled to the Admiralty: "Be pleased to inform their Lordships that the Italian battle fleet now lies at anchor under the guns of the fortress of Malta"

Italian battleships and cruisers lie at anchor outside Valletta's Grand Harbour after the surrender of the Italian Fleet in September, 1943.



High-Victorian evening dress, 1873

Bell